



## Obesity as a Public Health Issue: A Look at Solutions

### - Results from a National Poll -

The Harvard Forums on Health, a project of Harvard University's Interfaculty Program for Health Systems Improvement, commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) to conduct a national poll to explore the public's knowledge about obesity as a public health issue and their opinions about various policy options to fight obesity in adults and children. This national survey of 1,002 Americans age 18 and older was conducted May 28 through June 1, 2003. The main findings include:

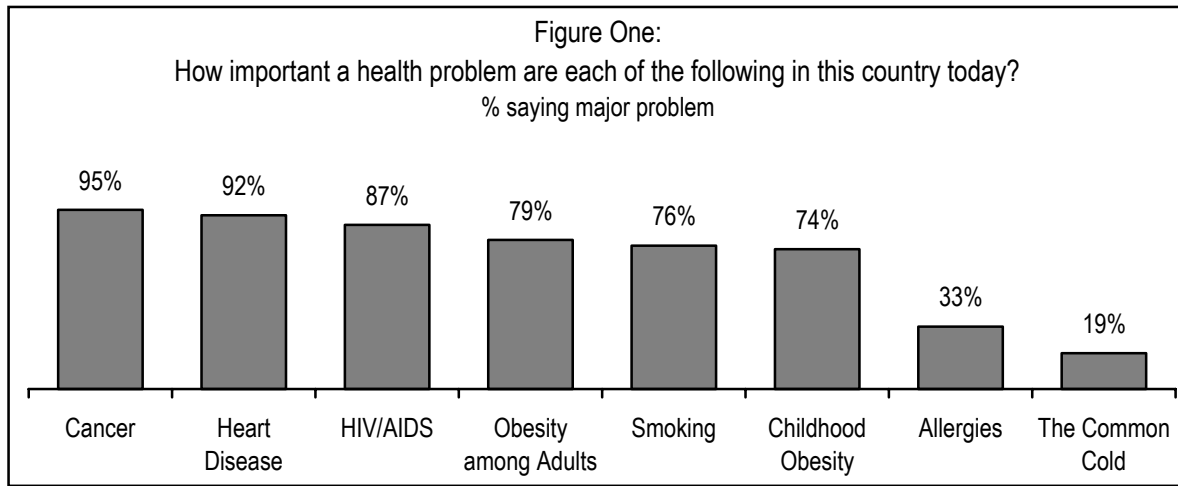
- Most Americans appreciate that obesity is a serious health concern in the U.S. today, comparable to smoking. Most know that obesity increases people's risk for health problems like high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.
- Americans are ambivalent about what role society – and government specifically – should play in fighting obesity. Most support efforts at improving awareness through media campaigns. Six in ten support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information on their menus. By comparison, the majority opposes putting a special tax on junk food.
- When it comes to fighting childhood obesity, most Americans welcome more government involvement. Most feel schools have a major role to play in fighting childhood obesity. Large majorities support healthier school lunches, more physical education, and efforts to educate students and parents about the health risks of obesity and the importance of exercising and eating healthy. Three quarters say they would support measures like these even if it meant an increase in their taxes.

These and other survey results can be found in detail on the following pages.

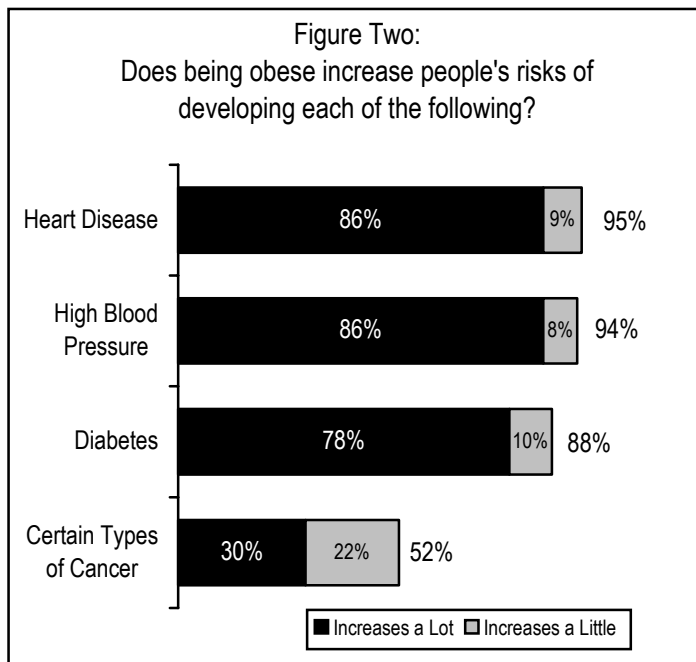
## FINDINGS IN DETAIL

### *Most Americans consider obesity a major health problem.*

Eight in ten (79%) consider obesity among adults to be a major health problem and three quarters (74%) believe childhood obesity is a major problem. As Figure One shows, obesity is considered about on par with smoking as a pressing health problem. Obesity is not considered as serious a threat as cancer, heart disease or HIV/AIDS. It is considered more of a problem than allergies and the common cold.



Women are more likely than men to see obesity among adults and children as major health threats. Surprisingly, parents of children age 18 and under are somewhat less likely than other adults to consider childhood obesity a major health problem.



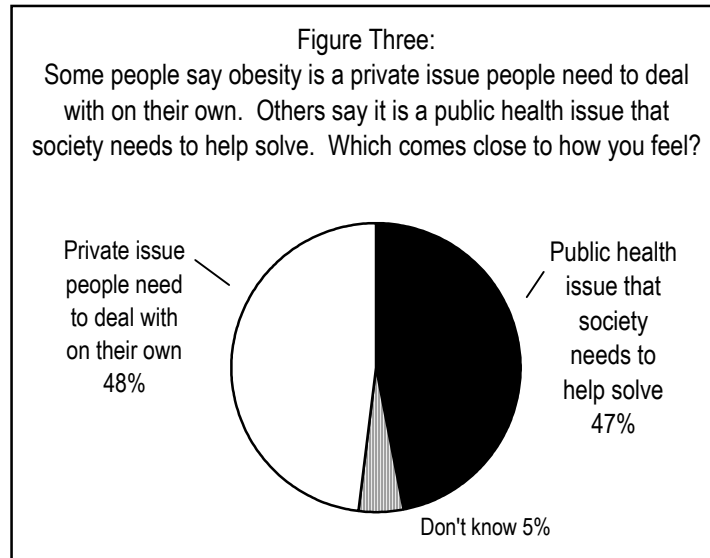
***Most Americans know that obesity increases the risks of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. Fewer know about other risks.***

Almost nine in ten Americans know that obesity greatly increases the risk of heart disease (86%) and high blood pressure (86%), and almost eight in ten (78%) know that obesity increases people's risk of developing diabetes a lot. The public knows less about recently identified risks. Only half (52%) know that obesity can increase the risk of some cancers (30% say a lot and 22% say a little).

**Americans are split between those who see obesity as mainly a private issue and those who believe it is a public health issue that requires societal intervention. Likewise, they are split about what role the government should play in fighting obesity.**

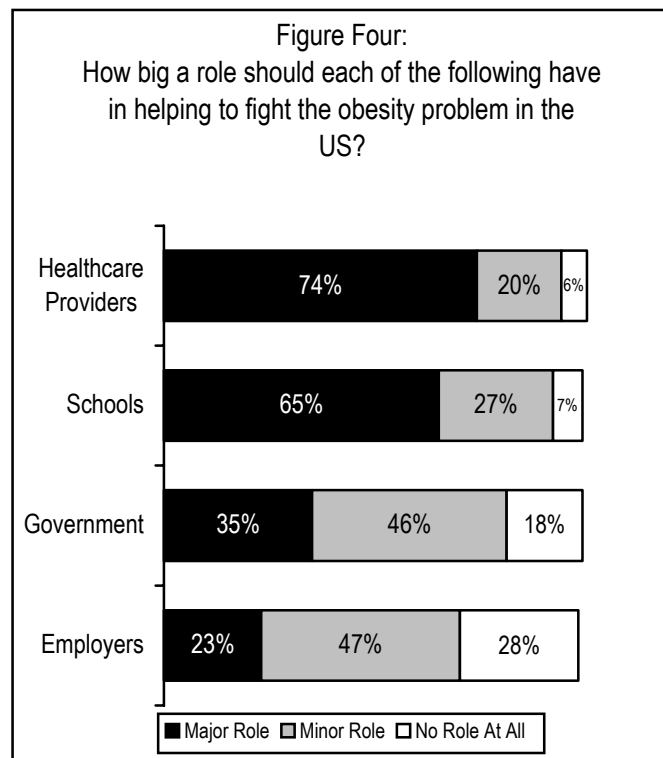
As Figure Three shows, half (48%) of those surveyed feel obesity is “a private issue that people need to deal with on their own” and half (47%) feel it is “a public health issue that society needs to help solve.”

Those who consider obesity a major health problem in the U.S. are much more likely than those who do not consider it a serious threat to feel societal intervention is necessary. This suggests educating the public about the extent of the problem is an important first step to putting the fight against obesity on the public agenda.



Another survey question illustrates Americans’ ambivalence about government involvement in fighting obesity. Respondents were asked about the role various institutions and groups should play in fighting obesity. (Figure Four) Most Americans (81%) believe the government should play a role, but only a third (35%) believe it should be a major role. Two in ten (18%) believe the government should not play any role at all. Again, those who see obesity as a major health threat see a larger role for the government.

It is worth noting that three quarters of the public (74%) believe healthcare providers should play a major role in fighting the obesity epidemic, placing them at the top of the list of institutions and groups the public feels should be major players. Two thirds (65%) feel schools have a major role to play, a finding that is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. Fewer see a major role for employers.



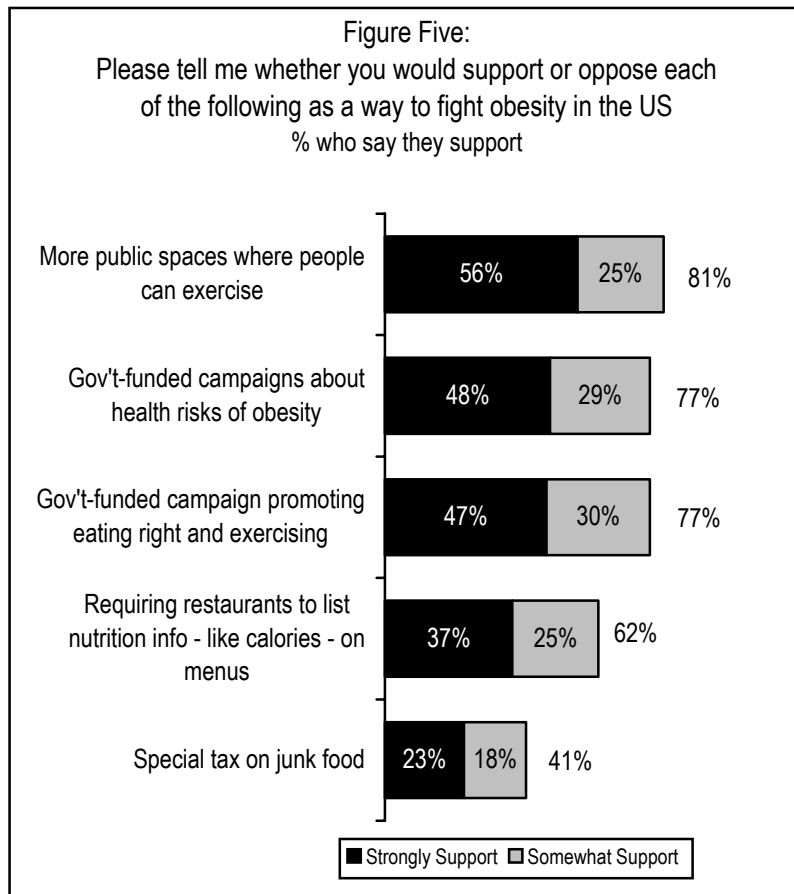
**Americans support some public measures to curb obesity, but are ambivalent about measures that seem too heavy-handed or that limit personal choice.**

Survey respondents were asked whether they support or oppose a number of measures aimed at curbing obesity. Support is strongest for those policy options that increase public awareness of the obesity issue and exercise options. There is less support for measures that seem more intrusive.

As Figure Five shows, eight in ten (81%) Americans support the creation of expanded public recreation spaces where people can exercise and over half (56%) support this idea strongly. There is also widespread support for government funded education campaigns about healthy eating and exercising (77%) and the health risks of obesity (77%).

There is less support – though still quite a bit – for requiring restaurants to help diners count calories (62%). Less than half (41%) support putting a special tax on junk food.

It is worth noting that African-Americans and Hispanics are especially enthusiastic about obesity education campaigns. Women are slightly more likely than men to support a law requiring restaurants to provide nutritional information on menus as well as taxes on junk food.



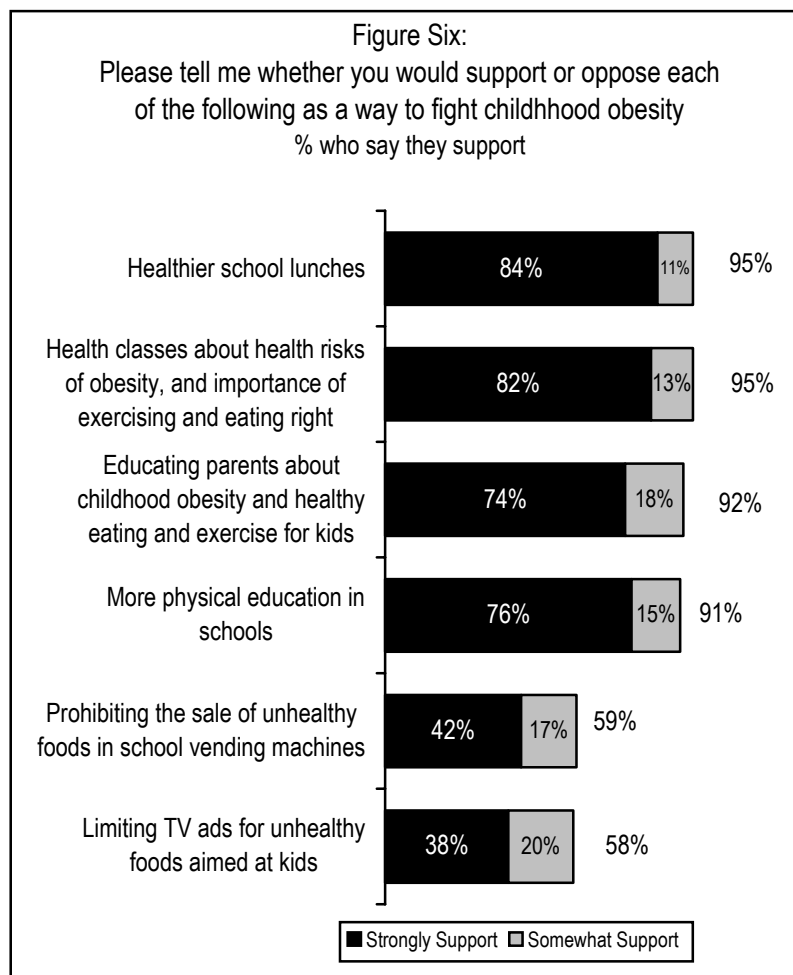
**Americans are more proactive where childhood obesity is concerned.**

As mentioned earlier, Americans are equally concerned about childhood obesity and obesity among adults. However, several survey results suggest that Americans are more supportive of efforts to fight childhood obesity than obesity in general. As Figure Four showed, two thirds of Americans (65%) believe schools should play a major role in helping to fight the obesity problem in the U.S., far more than see a major role for government.

Just as survey respondents were asked about their support for or opposition to a number of measures meant to help fight obesity in general (see Figure Five), so too were they asked about measures to fight childhood obesity specifically. When the overall results, shown in Figure Six, are compared to the support for general measures, the public’s willingness to do more to fight childhood obesity comes through. Four of the measures listed are *strongly* supported by over seven in ten of those surveyed, and two are *strongly* supported by over eight in ten. By comparison, only one of the policy options in Figure Five was strongly supported by a majority of Americans, and even then it was a slight majority of 56 percent.

The public’s preferences for measures aimed at fighting childhood obesity echo their feelings about policy options for fighting obesity in general. They are very supportive of measures aimed at giving children healthier choices and educating parents and children, but have mixed reactions to more far-reaching measures.

Majorities of over eight in ten *strongly* support providing healthier school lunches (84%) and requiring that school health education classes teach about the health risks of obesity and the importance of exercising and eating right (82%). Three quarters *strongly* support educating parents about childhood obesity and healthier eating habits and exercise for kids (74%) and more physical education in schools (76%). There is less support – though still some – for “limiting television advertisements for



unhealthy foods and drinks – like soda, chips and candy – that are targeted at children” (59%) and prohibiting the sale of unhealthy foods in school vending machines.

Americans say they are willing to support measures like these aimed at combating childhood obesity despite the cost. Three quarters (76%) say they would support measures like these if it meant an increase in their taxes. Four in ten (42%) say they would pay \$100 more a year in taxes to support efforts like these.